

UNCLASSIFIED//LAW ENFORCEMENT SENSITIVE

BRIC Homeland Security Bulletin

Fire as a Weapon

BRIC



BOSTON REGIONAL INTELLIGENCE CENTER

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(U//LES) SCOPE



(U//LES) This document is intended to provide area first responders with an assessment of terrorism-related incidents involving the use of fire as a weapon specifically targeting groups or individuals. The assessment includes different tactics used and propaganda advocated by a variety of violent extremists across the world. For the specific purpose of this assessment, the term "fire as a weapon" (FAW) refers to incidents where fire and / or an incendiary device was used to cause physical harm or death directly to human beings. The assessment has been prepared in compliance with the BRIC's Privacy, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Protection Policy and satisfies BRIC Standing Information Needs BRIC-01.0-TR-2015 (Terrorism), BRIC-01.0-TR-2015 (Domestic Terrorism), BRIC-02.0-CE-2015 (Criminal Enterprises), BRIC-04.0-CI-2015 (Critical Infrastructure and Key Resources), and BRIC-07.0-OS-2015 (Law Enforcement / Officer Safety).

(U//LES) INTRODUCTION

(U//LES) The trend of using readily available weapons in attacks across the world continues to rise and is often encouraged in violent extremist propaganda for a variety of ideologies. Using fire as a weapon is an ideal tactic for violent extremists because it is easily accessible, has the potential to cause a high number of casualties, can cause extensive damage and is visibly dramatic. Historically, fire has been more commonly used to target infrastructure in criminal or terrorism-related incidents; however, the use of fire as a weapon to specifically target people has also been used in a significant amount of incidents and could potentially increase as more violent extremists choose readily available weapons in their attacks.

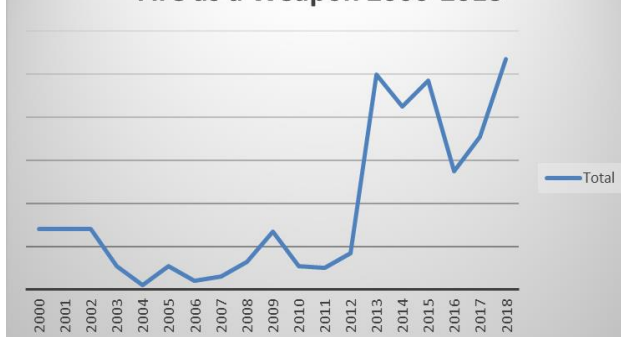


(U//LES) Officer lit on fire using accelerant at recent demonstration in Mexico

(U//LES) According to data from the Global Terrorism database maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START¹):

- There was almost a 300% increase in incidents where fire was used as a weapon between 2000 and 2018, with 2018 being the highest year at 107 incidents.
- Targeting law enforcement had a significant increase during this time period with three incidents in 2001 and 14 incidents in 2018. From 2013-2018, the average number of incidents targeting law enforcement was 14.
- Molotov cocktail/petrol bombs were the most common incendiary device used in attacks from 2000-2018; however, incidents with arson/fire were more deadly.

Fire as a Weapon 2000-2018



¹ The START dataset contains information on 190,000 terrorist attacks from 1970 – 2018. The data for 2019 is not yet available. The attack type used to filter down the incidents was Armed Assault or Assassination with weapon type as Incendiary, resulting in 2,493 incidents

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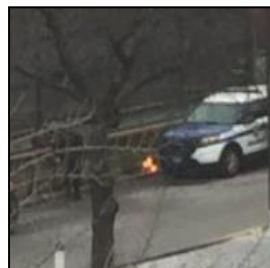
(U//LES) RECENT EXAMPLES IN THE U.S.

The below referenced incidents highlight the attractiveness of using fire as a weapon to target individuals.

- (U//LES) Improvised Incendiary Devices (IIDⁱ) were used at recent events across the United States including traditional Molotov cocktails, with bottles filled with ignitable liquids set on fire using a combustible cloth or wick as well as alternate variations of Molotov cocktails. Some alternate variations include a plastic container filled with gasoline and two D cell batteries wrapped in aluminum foil, and a plastic/glass bottle containing an ignitable fluid and functioned by lighting an M series firework.
 - (U//LES) On 2 June 2020, in Portland, Oregon, two individuals were arrested on rioting charges after they were seen testing a device in the back of a truck. A traffic stop was conducted and a propane brush burner was recovered.
 - (U//LES) On 5 June 2020, in Erie, Pennsylvania, two subjects were arrested in connection to riots during the weekend of 30-31 May 2020 and a flamethrower was recovered from the residence of one of the individuals.
- (U//LES) In January 2020, Asim KIETA was found guilty of planting and detonating a homemade incendiary device under a Boston Police cruiser in 2017. KIETA placed a propane tank under a Boston Police cruiser that later exploded in two stages. The first detonation created a fire near the cruiser and the second detonation injured three officers that were clearing the area.
- (U//LES) On 22 April 2020, Ashton NESMITH threw a lit Molotov cocktail at an officer as he was entering a parked Metropolitan PD cruiser in Washington D.C. The incendiary device hit the windshield before catching fire on the ground. The officer was not injured in the incident and the damage to the cruiser was minimal; however, a similar incident occurred at the same station on 12 April 2020 targeting an unoccupied police cruiser. It is unknown if NESMITH is involved in the April 12th incident.
- (U//LES) On 13 July 2019, an armed man, Willem Van SPRONSEN, was fatally shot by police after he threw incendiary devices and tried to set a commercial-size propane tank on fire at an immigration detention center in Tacoma, WA. The head of the detention center noted that setting the tank ablaze “could have resulted in the mass murder of staff and detainees housed at the facility had he been successful.”



(U//LES) Figure 6: IIDs recovered during civil unrest activity in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Source: FBI PG)

**(U//LES) VIOLENT EXTREMIST PROPAGANDA**

(U//LES) Violent extremists, both international and domestic, have continuously advocated for the use of readily available weapons to carry out attacks and often encourage the use of fire as a weapon as a potential tactic in propaganda. Certain tactics that have been advocated by extremists are using incendiary devices such as Molotov cocktails, or specifically spraying accelerants on targets then setting them on fire.

(U//LES) For domestic extremist ideology, white supremacy extremists (WSE) have distributed propaganda recently advocating for using fire as a weapon to target specific minority communities including African Americans and the Jewish community. Some extremists have discussed throwing explosives or setting fire to places of worship while congregants are gathering for services. Others have suggested using incendiary devices to target minority communities in their homes. Anti-government extremists have also advocated for using fire as a weapon to target politicians with opposing political views, media figures and law enforcement.



- (U//LES) 72-year-old Walter STOPLER was arrested in Miami, Florida in July 2018 after plotting to set his apartment building on fire with the aim of killing Jewish residents. The suspect, who possessed numerous Nazi-related items,

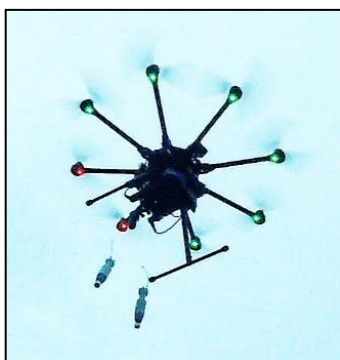
was apprehended while pouring gasoline down the building's trash chute. Authorities discovered incendiary and explosive precursor materials at the scene. In addition, the suspect allegedly intended to use padlocks to thwart rescue efforts.

(U//LES) In regards to foreign terrorist organizations, groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda have also distributed propaganda encouraging the use of fire as a weapon. On 4 October 2018 ISIS released an issue of its Arabic-language newsletter, al-Naba, which contained a detailed infographic encouraging supporters to use arson and improvised incendiary devices (IIDs), including Molotov cocktails, in attacks. The propaganda advised supporters to target tall buildings, forests near residential areas, warehouses, and commercial locations to maximize economic impact and casualties.

- (U//LES) A man publicly identified as Mohammad A.R. entered a McDonald's inside the central train station in Cologne, Germany and threw a Molotov cocktail as part of a multi-phase, hostage-taking attack on 15 October 2018 leaving three people injured. The individual reportedly had ties to radical Islam and had made demands during the hostage situation about being allowed to travel to Syria to join ISIS.
- (U//LES) On 2 May 2018, 17-year-old Matin AZIZI-YARAND of Plano, Texas was arrested in a counterterrorism investigation after planning to carry out a shooting at a local mall on behalf of ISIS. The suspect discussed wanting to shoot up a mall and set stores on fire to cause significant harm and damage. He also discussed wanting to record ambushing a police officer and setting them on fire with gasoline.



(U//LES) Tactical Highlight – Weaponized Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)



(U//LES) Weaponized UAVs equipped with explosives and incendiary devices have been used in several successful attacks overseas by Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). UAVs are easily accessible and relatively inexpensive, allowing almost any violent actor access to use a UAV in an attack. Weaponized UAV's are a particular concern when operating over a large public gathering, as they are able to bypass any physical security measure put in place to protect the event.

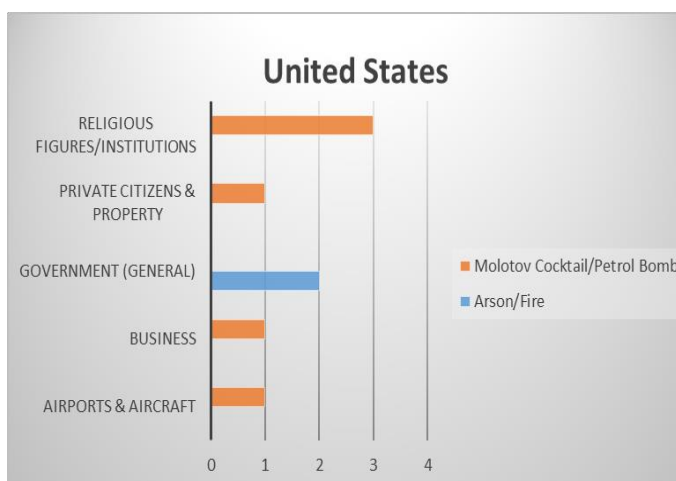
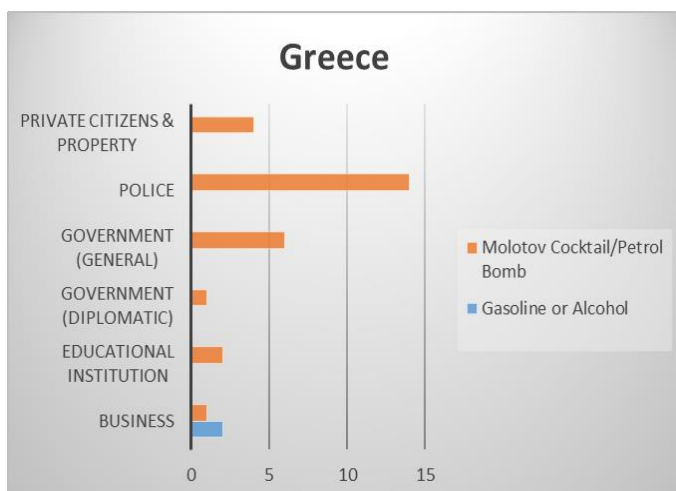
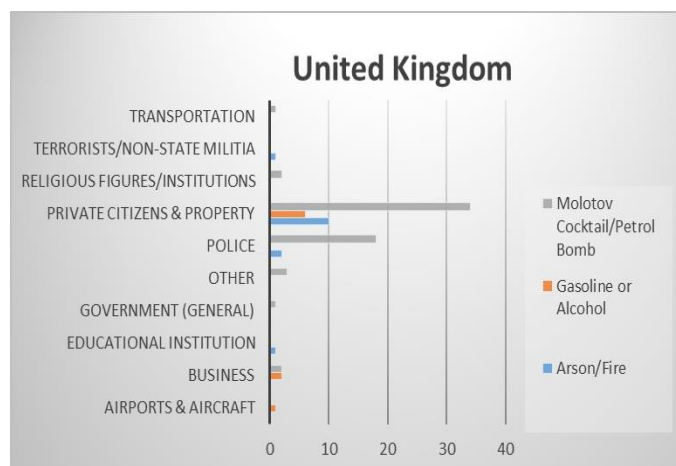
(U//LES) ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL INCIDENTS

The data in this section was queried from the Global Terrorism Database, designed and maintained by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).

(U//LES) From 2000-2018, there were 711 Armed Assault/Assassination attacks involving an incendiary device globally. Western Europe had the highest number of incidents at 175 with 80 wounded and six killed; however, the Sub-Saharan Africa region had the highest number of casualties with 1341 killed and 263 wounded in 143 incidents.

(U//LES) Tactics Used Internationally

- In Western Europe, the United Kingdom was the most active country for armed attacks involving an incendiary device with 84. The most common tactic used in these attacks was Molotov cocktail/petrol bombs and the most common targets were private residences and law enforcement personnel. Northern Ireland accounts for 90% of the United Kingdom's activity with 76 incidents. The high number of incidents in the Northern Ireland region can likely be attributed to political conflicts.
- The second highest country was Greece with 30 incidents and most of their incidents involving Molotov cocktail/petrol bombs targeting law enforcement. In recent years, anarchists in Greece have carried out bombings and attacks against government entities/personnel, law enforcement, consulates and the financial sector due to their perception of government corruption and the failed economy in that country.
- In Sub-Saharan Africa region, Nigeria had the highest number of incidents of 39 with 223 killed or wounded; however, Sudan had the highest number of casualties with 553 killed or wounded in 14 incidents. Many of the incidents in these regions had a high number of casualties among few incidents. For example, in 2014, Nigeria had 90 casualties in 11 incidents. In 2002, Sudan had 496 killed in nine incidents.



(U//LES) Tactics Used Nationally

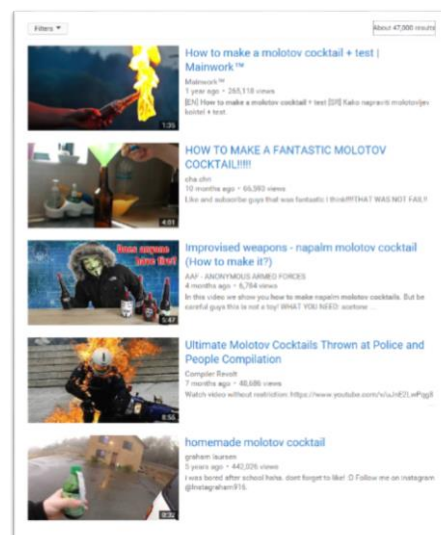
(U//LES) From 2000-2018 there were eight incidents in the U.S. using an incendiary device in an attack. The attacker(s) used Molotov cocktails/petrol bombs in six of the incidents and two of the incidents were fire/arson. The most common targets in the attacks were places of worship and government personnel (excluding military/police). Although this data shows that law enforcement officers were not frequently targeted with fire in the U.S. during the 2000-2018 timeframe, there have been several such incidents in 2019 and 2020. Law enforcement officers continue to be a significant target of violence and criminal activity across the country. Further, tactical trends that start overseas eventually make their way to the U.S.

(U//LES) INDICATORS & PROTECTIVE MEASURES**(U//LES) Why Use Fire?**

- Materials are readily available, don't arouse suspicion
- Visibly dramatic
- Instructional material easily accessible
- Lack of technical ability to employ

**(U//LES) Possible Indicators and Behaviors for IEDs and IIDs**

- Acquiring unusual amounts of precursors (i.e. foam, clocks, batteries, wires, acids, accelerants, propane tanks)
- Displaying unusual, nervous behavior when questioned about product use
- Conducting unusual research on weather, dry seasons, winds, types of forests or vegetation
- Conducting reconnaissance in remote, wooded areas, especially at night
- Asking about emergency response capabilities and procedures
- Internet research on targets, material selection, cases of arson
- Conducting practice runs, testing IIDs or explosive components

**(U//LES) OUTLOOK**

(U//LES) The BRIC has no information indicating a direct or credible threat to the Metro Boston Homeland Security Region at this time; however, there is a global trend of using readily available weapons in attacks across the world. Fire and incendiary devices are often advertised in extremist propaganda as a potential tactic that doesn't require any specialized training and incorporates materials that can be easily acquired. The use of fire as a weapon is particularly concerning as it can not only harm the intended targets but also put emergency personnel at risk when responding to such incidents.

(U//NP) SOURCES

(U//NP) ["Armed man killed during attack on ICE detention center, police say"](#), *Washington Post*. 14 June 2019

(U//NP) ["Man charged with throwing molotov cocktail at occupied D.C. police car"](#), *Washington Post*. 23 April 2020

(U//NP) ["Plano teen accused of planning ISIS-inspired attack at Frisco mall pleads guilty"](#), *ABC 8 WFAA*. 8 April 2019

(U//NP) ["Cologne hostage drama 'likely a terrorist act'"](#), *The Local Germany*. 17 October 2018

(U//NP) ["Global Terrorism Database"](#), *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism*. Accessed 1 March 2020 – 19 June 2020

(U//LES) "IS Proposes Arson to Lone Wolves and Suggests Targets in Naba 150", *SITE*. 4 October 2018.

ⁱ IID is a general term for any type of a device capable of igniting and causing a fire to spread, unabated, without being initiated by an explosive payload